

Many experts fear that the world's most dangerous weapons are **closer than ever** to falling into dangerous hands. John McCain and Barack Obama are heeding their warnings.

Nuclear Breakout

■ By James Kitfield



The nuclear leviathan, its global shackles snapping with alarming regularity, is close to breaking loose. That may surprise a nation transfixed by a presidential campaign and the already daunting challenges of war abroad and economic turmoil at home. Yet, if the imperiled nonproliferation regime collapses and multiple state and nonstate actors get their hands on nuclear technology and weapons, the calamity likely to ensue would dwarf today's challenges and could overwhelm a new administration.

Consider that in June the world learned that the nuclear smuggling ring of Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan not only sold bomb-related parts to Libya, Iran, and North Korea but also acquired electronic blueprints for an advanced nuclear weapon, and that rogue states or terrorists may have already downloaded them. U.S. intelligence officials, who have long been denied an interview with Khan (still considered a hero in his homeland), privately admit that elements of his nuclear smuggling network may still operate.

The hermit kingdom in North Korea remains a serious threat. As part of the ongoing and difficult negotiations led by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, Pyongyang recently began dismantling its plutonium reactor at Yongbyon and declared some of its nuclear weapons activities, but evidence has once again surfaced suggesting that North Korea has a secret uranium enrichment program. The world's newest declared nuclear weapons

state, North Korea has reportedly assisted Syria in building a clandestine nuclear reactor at the remote desert site of al-Kibar. Israeli warplanes destroyed the facility last September, after which Syrian authorities bulldozed the area in an apparent attempt to destroy lingering evidence.

For its part, Iran continues to sit atop the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, and to rebuff international weapons inspectors in an apparent headlong drive to join the nuclear club. In April, Tehran announced that it was tripling the number of its centri-

fuges for enriching uranium—the key missing ingredient for what Western analysts are convinced is Iran's nuclear weapons program. In May, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, issued a scathing report that catalogued Iran's continued stonewalling of inspectors and prompted some experts to suggest that Iran may be within a year of acquiring a nuclear weapon. In June, Israel conducted military exercises involving more than a hundred aircraft in possible anticipation of an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain has repeatedly said that the only thing worse than bombing Iran would be Iran's acquiring a nuclear bomb, a view that President Bush has long shared. "To allow the world's leading sponsor of terror to gain the world's deadliest weapon would be an unforgivable betrayal of future generations," Bush said on May 18. "For the sake of peace, the world must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

The potential for an Iranian nuclear weapon to ignite a chain reaction that destabilizes an already volatile Middle East is clear. After eyeing Iran's reported nuclear weapons activities, virtually all of its neighbors have either announced plans to explore atomic energy or signed nuclear cooperation agreements.

"As I look at the proliferation environment around the world, I see grave dangers," said Barry Blechman, co-founder of the Henry Stimson Center, a nonprofit public policy institute. "Specifically, if the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs are not rolled back, we're likely to see a

further wave of nuclear proliferation in East Asia and the Middle East," he said, speaking at a recent symposium on nuclear weapons. "Already, the nations in the Persian Gulf region are expressing a new interest in civilian nuclear programs, which are the first step towards getting a weapon."

Cracks in the Firewall

With the price of oil near \$140 a barrel and global demand outpacing supply, experts are tracking a huge spike in interest in nuclear energy programs worldwide. Each new program exposes vulnerability in the complex architecture of nonproliferation. According to the IAEA, 40 nations have stated their interest in starting civilian nuclear power programs, and nearly a dozen want to produce nuclear fuels. That capability will put them on the cusp of cracking the nuclear weapons code.

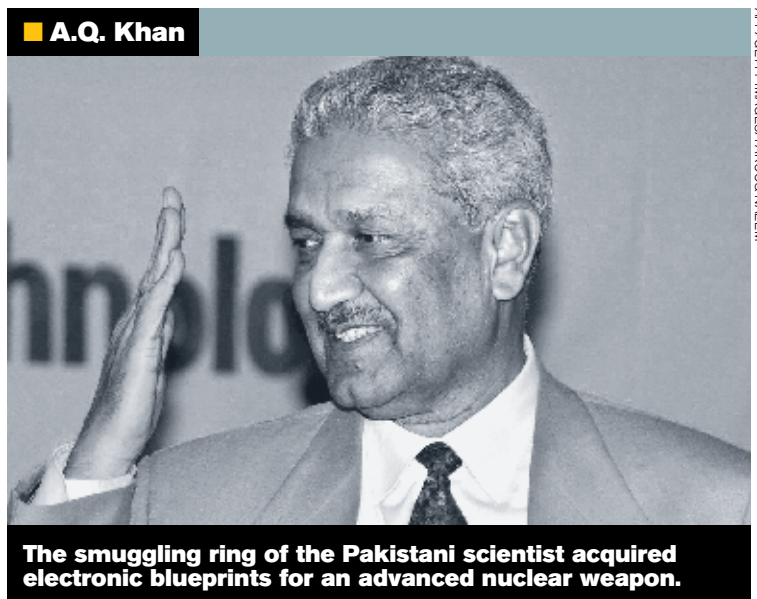
Yet, because of a loophole in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which Iran has expertly exploited, nations that submit themselves to IAEA inspections are entitled to civilian nuclear programs and have the right to develop nuclear fuel cycles.

Meanwhile, the United States' own nuclear weapons complex, considered the most technologically advanced in the world, is showing security cracks. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently forced the resignations of the top Air Force leadership over their lax stewardship of the U.S. nuclear stockpile. Lapses included inadvertently flying nuclear missiles across the country on a B-52 bomber and mistakenly shipping nuclear fuses to Taiwan.

A follow-up Air Force investigation concluded that hundreds of sensitive nuclear missile components are unaccounted for and may be missing. Furthermore, "most sites" that house deployed U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe—many of them relatively transportable "tactical" weapons—fail to meet the Pentagon's security requirements.

A report from the Air Force Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Weapons Policies and Procedures, which the Federation of American Scientists obtained and made public through a Freedom of Information Act request, catalogs inadequate security systems and poorly trained military and private security per-

WAR GAMES:
Iranian
clergy
watch a
Shahab-3
long-range
ballistic
missile being
fired as part
of military
exercises
in 2006. A
similar test
was conducted
on July 9.



■ A.Q. Khan

The smuggling ring of the Pakistani scientist acquired electronic blueprints for an advanced nuclear weapon.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES/FAROOQ NAEM

sonnel at nuclear weapons sites in Europe. “Without an alert commitment for 17 years,” the report concluded, referring to a nuclear alert by the U.S. Air Force, “the bomber force has seen a dramatic atrophy of its nuclear operational and academic skills set.”

Taken together, the developments have convinced many close observers that the nonproliferation regime of arms control treaties, multilateral and bilateral agreements, threat reduction programs, counter-proliferation and interdiction operations, and sanctions—constructed over a half-century to contain the nuclear menace—may be nearing a potentially devastating collapse.

Former Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., who co-chairs the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing the

nuclear technologies and weapons. Heading the list of likely culprits are Osama bin Laden and other top Qaeda leaders, along with their Taliban allies, who have regrouped and are plotting attacks against the United States from sanctuaries in Pakistan’s lawless tribal belt. Al Qaeda is now training 2,000 local and foreign militants at makeshift compounds in Pakistan, according to a retired CIA analyst quoted in a recent article in *The New York Times*.

Certainly, nuclear weapons have never been far from the fevered thoughts of the nihilistic terrorist group that has made suicide-bombing a modern scourge. Bin Laden famously proclaimed that acquiring weapons of mass destruction is a “religious duty” for Muslims. In 2003, he obtained a fatwa from Saudi cleric Nasser al-Fahd justifying the use of weapons of mass destruction, and as far back as the 1990s, he selected a point man specifically to pursue nuclear weapons technologies. Before 9/11, documented contacts took place between Al Qaeda and sympathetic Pakistani nuclear scientists and physicists.

In 2006 bin Laden threatened, “Operations are being prepared, and you will see them in your own backyard.” Experience strongly suggests that Al Qaeda hopes to launch an attack even more spectacular than 9/11. According to a 2007 British intelligence report, Qaeda operatives are planning an attack “on a par with Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

Recent revelations that David Albright, a former IAEA inspector in Iraq, discovered blueprints for an advanced nuclear weapon on the computers of members of the A.Q. Khan smuggling network raise the possibility, at least, that the greatest remaining impediment for sophisticated groups that are intent on building a nuclear weapon may be the difficulty of acquiring weapons-grade fissile material.

Where would a terrorist group find such material? Of the more than 1,000 documented cases of nuclear smuggling since the breakup of the former Soviet Union, about 20 were confirmed to have involved weapons-grade uranium or plutonium, intelligence experts say. “Sting” operations by intelligence and police agencies have ensnared most, if not all, of the smugglers in those 20 cases. But what if one needle is still in the haystack? Intelligence officials have little doubt about what Al Qaeda would do if it acquired a nuclear weapon.

“The post-9/11 successes against the Taliban in Afghanistan yielded volumes of information that changed our view of Al Qaeda’s nuclear program—we learned that Al Qaeda wants weapons to use, not a program to sustain and build a stockpile, as most nations would,” said Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, who spent most of his career in the CIA before becoming the director of the Office

■ Hiroshima



AP IMAGES

A British intelligence report says that Al Qaeda is planning an attack “on par with Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” The 1945 atomic bomb explosion killed 140,000 people.

spread and use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, said, “If you look at the proliferation of nuclear materials and technology that has occurred over the past 30 years, consider this great renewal of interest in nuclear energy as a result of high oil prices, and add terrorists willing to commit suicide in order to kill as many people as possible, then I think you have a perfect storm.” That this storm is brewing at a time when traditional restraints on nuclear proliferation are severely weakened, Nunn told *National Journal*, only adds to the growing danger. “My own view is that we’re still in a race between cooperation and catastrophe.”

A Watchful Menace

Intelligence analysts have no doubt that hidden hands are always searching for weaknesses in the firewalls that protect

of Intelligence and Counterintelligence at the Energy Department, which is the custodian of the U.S. nuclear complex.

“Thus it is not difficult in today’s world to imagine an escalation of stakes to the ultraviolence represented by unleashing a nuclear attack on the world,” Mowatt-Larssen said, speaking recently at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “So we continue to face the enduring consequences of letting the nuclear genie out of the bottle.”

Weakening Safeguards

Nearly seven years after the 9/11 attacks and President Bush’s warning that the world’s most dangerous weapons must not fall into dangerous hands, how is it that the nuclear genie is now straining at its bonds in a way not seen since the runaway arms race of the 1960s and 1970s?

The same era of globalization and the World Wide Web that has given rise to terrorist groups with international reach has facilitated the diffusion of knowledge and technology, including details about nuclear weapons. Nuclear technology that was state-of-the-art and closely held half a century ago has gradually seeped into the global information pool.

The unipolar world that emerged in the post-Cold War era of the 1990s, with its great imbalance of power in favor of the United States, also created incentives for potential antagonists to acquire the means to deter the superpower’s conventional military superiority. In some cases, those incentives were stoked by the post-9/11 Bush Doctrine, with its emphasis on military coercion, pre-emption, and regime change in an “axis of evil” of rogue nations, two of which (Iran and North Korea) remain today’s foremost potential nuclear threats.

In looking for answers, many experts are also refocusing on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the foundation of the nonproliferation regime that helped slow the arms race and avoid the scenario of a world awash in nuclear weapons. After barely avoiding a nuclear holocaust during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy provided a personal glimpse of that nightmarish future.

“I ask you to stop and think for a moment what it would mean to have nuclear weapons in so many hands, in the hands of countries large and small, stable and unstable, responsible and irresponsible, scattered throughout the world,” Kennedy warned. “There would be no rest for anyone then, no stability, no real security, and no chance for effective disarmament.”

To avert that potential cataclysm, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty established a global consensus around the principle that nuclear weapons are a threat to humankind. The grand bargain at its core is a pledge by the five original nuclear states (the United States, Russia, France, Great Britain, and China) to limit, reduce, and eventually eliminate their nuclear weapons on some indeterminable timetable, and to share civilian nuclear energy technology.

In return, more than 180 signatory nations agreed to forgo nuclear weapons altogether. The treaty is widely credited for the fact that only nine nuclear weapons states exist today, rather than the 25, or more, that Kennedy had anticipated.

NPT Under Siege

In recent years, however, successive blows from treaty outliers such as India, Israel, and Pakistan—none of which has signed the treaty or paid any substantive price for acquiring nuclear weapons—have rocked the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty regime. India and Pakistan each tested nuclear weapons in 1998, and their common border remains perhaps the world’s most dangerous nuclear fault line. In the past year, the Bush administration has sought a far-reaching nuclear cooperation agreement with India that would permit U.S. sales of nuclear fuel and technology to New Delhi for civilian energy purposes.

Such signatories as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Syria have further weakened the NPT with cheating and clandestine nuclear activities that have exposed structural weaknesses and dangerous loopholes in the treaty. The pact is widely acknowledged to lack adequate verification and inspection measures to catch states, such as Iran, that mask their nuclear weapons ambitions under the guise of civilian nuclear power programs. The treaty also lacks sanctions to punish nations that reap the benefits of shared civil nuclear technology and then simply withdraw from the pact when their violations are revealed, as North Korea did in 2002.

Yet the nonproliferation regime represented by the NPT has also undeniably suffered from the recent indifference, and in some cases outright hostility, of the United States. The extent to which America’s reliable bipartisan consensus on nuclear weapons had fractured in the post-Cold War era became evident in 1999, when the Republican-controlled Senate sent shock waves through the arms control community by rejecting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The Senate had not rejected a treaty since the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

Early on, the Bush administration made clear its intention to minimize

the impingement of arms control treaties and nonproliferation agreements on the U.S. military’s freedom of action. It repudiated commitments made at the 2000 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference by the Clinton administration to resurrect the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and abide by the Antibalistic Missile Treaty, which Bush scuttled as an obstacle to constructing a missile defense system.

The nonproliferation treaty’s core pledge that nuclear weapons states will diminish the role of the weapons, and work toward disarmament, was also difficult to square with the Bush administration’s desire to develop “bunker-buster” nukes for new strategic missions and to keep its options open for putting weapons in space as part of a shield against nuclear missiles.

Rather than try to strengthen the nonproliferation treaty’s regime at a 2005 review conference, the Bush administration sent a midlevel delegation that essentially stood on the sidelines. In the judgment of the administration, friendly nations, such as India and Israel, that refused to submit to the treaty were not the problem.

“The Bush administration narrowly defined the proliferation threat as rogue states and decided military pre-emption was the way to deal with it, with Iraq as the test case,” said Joseph Cirincione, a longtime arms control advocate who now heads the

■ A Growing Risk

- Osama bin Laden has proclaimed that acquiring weapons of mass destruction is a “religious duty” for Muslims.
- Each new nuclear energy program exposes vulnerability in the complex architecture of nuclear nonproliferation.
- Nuclear technology that was closely held half a century ago has gradually seeped into the global information pool.

Ploughshares Fund, a nonprofit grant-making organization. “So we invaded a country that didn’t have weapons of mass destruction, and encouraged those nations pursuing nuclear weapons, like North Korea and Iran, to accelerate their programs to deter us. The result of this failed experiment is that almost every proliferation problem the Bush administration inherited has grown worse over the past seven years.”

Bush Legacy

Supporters argue that the administration developed tools, beginning with a missile defense system, that will prove essential to a viable nonproliferation regime. They hail as a success the administration’s 2003 Proliferation Security Initiative, a multilateral if largely informal counter-proliferation pact to interdict nuclear weapons and materials in transit. Since the invasion of Iraq, military pre-emption has been de-emphasized by the administration, but it remains a potential tool in the U.S. arsenal to deal with a rogue state breakout.

In 2002, the administration signed the Moscow Treaty, which calls for reducing the Russian and U.S. nuclear arsenals to 1,700 to 2,200 warheads. The cursory document lacks verification provisions or confidence-building measures, however; and because it includes no requirement that warheads be destroyed, it is reversible. The treaty expires in 2012.

More fundamentally, supporters argue that scant evidence exists to contradict the Bush administration’s argument that rogue nations such as Iran and North Korea will thwart international norms no matter what broad disarmament principles or good-faith measures the U.S. adopts.

“When you look at Iran, North Korea, and Syria, and consider that the United States is willing to bless a nuclear weapons state outside of the NPT in India, there should be no doubt in anyone’s mind that the wheels have come off the bus in terms of international nonproliferation and arms control regimes,” said Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank and home to many high-profile neoconservatives. “I have a problem, however, with this argument that history started with George W. Bush, whose aggressive approach caused the collapse of the global nonproliferation regime. We were negotiating arms control with North Korea in the 1990s at a time when it continued work on a nuclear weapons program and was sharing its nuclear technology. Ditto Iran. So while the Bush approach may not have worked, there’s little evidence to show that aggressive diplomacy and international arms control conferences have solved the problem either.”

There is little doubt, however, that the Bush administration’s view that arms control treaties are inherently unverifiable and overly constraining on U.S. freedom of action undermined the grand bargain at the heart of the nonproliferation treaty. And, absent the principles expressed in the nonproliferation treaty, the world community has no norms restricting nuclear proliferation, no standards by which the IAEA’s inspectors can judge the



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—former Sen. Sam Nunn

safety and security of its members’ nuclear activities, and no basis in law for rallying the international community to apply pressure and sanctions against nuclear rogues.

“The Bush administration’s unilateralism and notion that arms control agreements didn’t really matter anymore, and that the United States would certainly not be part of any agreement that constrained us, had a big psychological impact,” said Graham Allison, director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. The United States’ position that the world’s only superpower needed new nuclear weapons and fewer constraints from arms control treaties, he said, provoked cynicism about the bargain between nuclear “haves” and “have-nots” that serves as the foundation of the nonproliferation treaty. “We’ve basically taken the [nonproliferation] system for granted until it has unraveled, and it is now eroding to the point of irreversibility,” Allison told *National Journal*. “Beyond that point, we’ll see a cascade of proliferation.”

Enter Four Horsemen

Watching quietly from the sidelines in recent years as the threat of nuclear breakout grew, and the walls of containment crumbled, were four esteemed Cold Warriors from different sides of the political aisle. Each recalled a time when a bipartisan consensus on nonproliferation carried the day in the United States.

Former Sen. Nunn, who had chaired the Armed Services Committee, was in regular contact with former Clinton administration Defense Secretary William Perry. The two had worked closely together in 1994 when the country very nearly went to war over North Korea’s nuclear program.

Perry and Nunn were in regular contact with Republican George Shultz, who as a former secretary of State for President Reagan had never forgotten his boss’s vision of a world free of the nuclear shadow or Reagan’s willingness to act boldly on that vision at the unsuccessful Reykjavik summit in 1986. For his part, Shultz was in close contact with Henry Kissinger, a former secretary of State and national security adviser for Richard Nixon, the president who signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1970.

In January 2007, those unlikely bedfellows co-signed an article in *The Wall Street Journal* that changed the nonproliferation debate in a pen stroke. Under the headline “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” their article argued that absent urgent action the United States would soon enter a new nuclear era that “will be more precarious, psychologically disorienting, and economically even more costly than was Cold War deterrence.”

To avoid that treacherous scenario, the former top officials called on America to reclaim its moral heritage and reassert “the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, and practical measures toward achieving that goal.”

“I would say that all four of us came to a common conclusion from different places and at different paces,” Nunn said. “There’s an old Winston Churchill saying that no matter how

beautiful the strategy, occasionally you have to consider the results. And the results are pretty clear that we're heading in the wrong direction on nuclear proliferation. That's why we tried to breathe new life into an old idea, because without the United States displaying leadership and a vision of a world that will someday be rid of nuclear weapons, we will not get the cooperation internationally for steps that are necessary to protect our own society."

Embracing the Vision

The steps prescribed by what arms control proponents are calling the "four horsemen of the anti-apocalypse" read like a nonproliferation treaty resuscitation kit. On May 26, presumptive Republican presidential candidate McCain broke sharply with the Bush administration by embracing, at least rhetorically, most of their recommendations.

"The United States should lead a global effort at nuclear disarmament," said McCain, who promised as president to "take another look" at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; try to sign a new arms control agreement with Russia for further steep reductions in nuclear arsenals, only this time with binding verification measures; explore ways to eliminate tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe; work toward a moratorium on the production of nuclear materials; strengthen and reform the nonproliferation treaty by enhancing its verification and sanctions protocols; increase funding for the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program for securing fissile material stockpiles; and cancel work on a new nuclear bunker-buster weapon.

For his part, presumptive Democratic nominee Obama has indicated a willingness to go even further in reinvigorating nonproliferation efforts. He has categorically promised, for instance, to make ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty a priority, and along with Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., he has outlined a strategy to strengthen U.S. nonproliferation and disarmament policy. "We will not pursue unilateral disarmament," Obama said. "But we'll keep our commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty on the long road towards eliminating nuclear weapons."

Stephen Young is a nonproliferation expert at the Union of Concerned Scientists and a strong advocate of arms control. "The fact that McCain and Obama are both speaking about the elimination of nuclear weapons shows you how hard it is to overstate the importance of that op-ed by the four horsemen. They have changed the debate enormously," he said. "Whether you support or reject their ideas, they are at the center of virtually every debate in nuclear and nonproliferation circles today. And they have followed up their op-ed very aggressively."

A Promised Land

Indeed, the disarmament declaration of Nunn, Shultz, Perry, and Kissinger unleashed an avalanche of activity that some



RICHARD A. BLOOM

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—Danielle Pletka
of the American Enterprise Institute

experts perceive as the early rumblings of a true shift in the nuclear weapons paradigm. Perry will co-chair a congressionally mandated strategic posture review expected later this year that many observers believe will offer a road map toward disarmament. The Joint Chiefs of Staff is working on its own strategic review for next year.

The conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where Shultz and Perry are scholars, has already endorsed a series of practical steps toward nuclear abolition. Of the 24 former national security advisers and secretaries of State and Defense still living, 17 have already endorsed the Hoover campaign. Many other think tanks and nonproliferation organizations at home and abroad are trying to fashion work-arounds to bypass various obstacles to nuclear disarmament.

Not everyone, of course, has hopped on the disarmament bandwagon. A core of 20 to 25 senators has consistently opposed sweeping arms control agreements as an impingement on American sovereignty, and their opposition remains potent. Even some arms control advocates fear that the utopian vision of a world free of nuclear weapons could prove to

be the enemy of good, albeit more modest, steps toward limiting their importance.

"Efforts to negotiate a total elimination of nuclear weapons [are] misplaced and in some ways dangerously counterproductive," said Morton Halperin, a former Clinton administration official who is co-chairing a panel on nuclear weapons sponsored by the New America Foundation, a think tank in Washington. "If the next president tries to build a consensus behind elimination, it will bring out people on the other side who argue persuasively that the goal is not feasible as long as you have nation-states with military forces. The debate would be consumed by the unrealistic subject of total disarmament, providing an excuse to do nothing. Basically, you can't un-invent nuclear weapons."

Proponents of nuclear abolition often invoke the metaphor of a mountain whose peak is shrouded in clouds of uncertainty, and a clearly visible abyss that awaits below its long downward slope. When JFK and Reagan evoked their visions of a world free of nuclear weapons, in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively, who could have foreseen that the Soviet Union would cease to exist and the Cold War arms race recede into history?

"It may not be our generation that gets to the top of the mountain, and I'm not predicting that it will happen in my lifetime," Nunn said. "We'll need a huge psychological change to turn around our descent and get to higher ground. If we use technology to keep climbing and increasing trust, and stay true to this vision of an elimination of nuclear weapons, however, then some day a future generation may be able to see the top of the mountain. That's my hope." ■

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